

Greetings Madame Chairman and Members of the Committee,

I am Laura Buckner, Mom to David and Michael. David is 19, has developmental disabilities, and graduated high school last May. I'm here to speak to you today in support of Senate Bill 1489. I appreciate Senator Watson's work to bring this bill forward.

I am a former special educator and a parent with 16 years of IEP meetings under my belt. I have the experience of sitting on both sides of the IEP planning table. In my current work I provide training around the state on a variety of disability issues. I have had the privilege of working with parents and educators all over Texas.

I am excited about Senate Bill 1489 because it opens the door to more collaborative and productive IEP meetings for both sides of the table, which ultimately means a better IEP for the child. And isn't that what that meeting is supposed to be all about?

My experience is that most educators are in the business for the right reasons – they care about kids, they love to teach, and they work long hard hours to make good things happen for the kids in their classrooms.

My experience also tells me that most parents are not angry, confrontational people who come into the process intent on filing a lawsuit against the school district. The vast majority of parents only want what's best for their child and they look to the education professionals to help make that happen.

But sadly, for a variety of reasons, all of those good intentions can fall by the wayside when the two parties are seated at an IEP planning meeting. I think many times the process breaks down due to a simple lack of communication and understanding, and even a lot of fear. Educators attend in-service trainings where attorneys warn them of all kinds of things that can go wrong with parents. Parents feel ill-prepared and overwhelmed by the IEP process; when they bring along a friend or an advocate they can be perceived as a potential lawsuit. As an educated and assertive parent, I endured years of silent alarm bells going off whenever I approached the school building, and I had no interest or intention of pursuing any kind of legal action against the school – I was just trying to ensure that my son would be as well prepared for his adult life as he could be. The entire process, even with the best of intentions, can quickly dissolve into an adversarial and conflicted mess...and where are the child's best interests in that?

Senate Bill 1489 will develop an alternative dispute resolution option called IEP facilitation. This will be a voluntary process agreed to by both the school and the family. The facilitator will be an independent contractor, well versed in special education law and process and skilled at creating collaborative relationships. IEP facilitation has been successfully implemented in a number of other states with promising results. Relationships between parents and schools are improved, conflicts are resolved before they escalate, and all committee members are supported to participate fully and honestly.

What parent or educator willingly enters into due process? I haven't met one yet. It's a last resort, and often the result of poor communication and collaboration. IEP facilitation offers the possibility of avoiding legal action and instead creating an effective IEP that meets the needs of the student.

Thank you for your time.